View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Elsevier - Publisher Connector

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 158 (2014) 383 – 388

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

14th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium

Direct style and rhetoric of freedom in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

Violetta Trofimova*

Independent scholar, Pskovskaja 13-3, St. Petersburg 190121, Russia

Abstract

The paper discusses the use of direct speech in *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* by Aphra Behn (1688). As the majority of the direct speech in this novel belongs to the hero Oroonoko, special attention is paid to the choice of words and subject of his speeches. The central point is the analysis of his speech against slavery and his views on freedom.
© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.

Keywords: Aphra Behn ; Oroonoko ; freedom ; slavery ; emancipation ; direct speech.

Introduction

The notion "direct style" has different meanings in different contexts. It is usually understood in the following way: the speaker or writer textually reproduces the words with which the author of them has expressed himself, that is, it is the style based on direct speech in contrast to indirect style based on indirect speech. The introducer phrase in direct style makes us know whether a character or the author is speaking. While quotes are an obvious sign of direct speech, they are sometimes omitted. Other meaning of direct style is telling a story without letting the words get in the way. This is a special prose style introduced by Ernest Hemingway, the style which involves telling a story as simply and directly as possible, with few adjectives, adverbs or figures of speech. English prose of the Restoration period (1660-1688) is often called "direct" and plain in contrast to the prose of the previous periods. Restoration prose is considered to be the starting point for modern English prose.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +79213088837;
E-mail address: violet_trofimova@mail.ru

1877-0428 © 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.104

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was one of the leading prose writers of the Restoration period. Her most important work is a short novel *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* (1688), and she also explored other genres of prose fiction, such as epistolary novel and novella. Marilyn Robitaille claims that "in *Oroonoko*, Behn sets into motion a virtual cacophony of social questions concerning issues relating to freedom and slavery... personal and public duty..." etc. (Robitaille, 1995). *Oroonoko* has been subject to various types of analysis: historical, gender, cultural, and has been considered, among others, a political allegory and a colonialist novel. One of the much disputed questions about *Oroonoko* is whether this text is protoabolitionist or not. It has been argued that Aphra Behn promoted aristocratic values in her novel, and did not condemn the institute of slavery itself. Her hero, African prince Oroonoko, is a slave-owner involved in the trade in slaves. Nevertheless, the text of the novel resists the interpretation that *Oroonoko* is not about the question of slavery and the condition of Black slaves on South American plantations. I am going to reveal the issues of slavery, freedom and emancipation analysing the use of direct speech in *Oroonoko*.

Body

Although *Oroonoko* is a first-person narrative, its narrator is a homodiegetic narrator, as "Aphra Behn" – the narrator is not the main character of the novel. The hero of the novel is prince Oroonoko. His voice is as distinct in the novel as the voice of the narrator. This voice is transmitted by means of direct and indirect speech. Oroonoko has the majority of direct speech in the text. He rarely enters a dialogue, although short dialogues are present in the novel. Most of Oroonoko's direct speech is monologues addressed to the audience. His relationship to the conversationalists is not that of equals, although he sometimes seeks it, but that of a leader and his supporters, a king and his courtiers or a general and his soldiers. Oroonoko's direct speech is sometimes preceded by the indirect speech and always marked by introducer phrases (tags).

The first piece of lengthy direct speech by Oroonoko is found in the part of the novel set in Africa. It is significant that the introducer phrase "he would often cry" signals repeated action (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko addresses his speech to his "Friends" and laments the loss of his beloved Imoinda. This monologue is full of images of death, expressed by means of a simile – "Imoinda is as irrecoverably lost to me as if she were snatch'd by the cold Arms of Death" - and a metaphor – "Fate shou'd bow the old King to his Grave" (Behn, 1997). The speech creates impression of utter despair. Oroonoko uses the word "free" twice, but does not mention slavery. Nevertheless, the image of confinement and total submission to custom is evolved: "That Custom that makes it so vile a Crime for a Son to marry his Father's Wives or Mistresses, wou'd hinder my Happiness" (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko also anticipates his future, while discussing the possibility of flying with Imoinda "to some unknown World, who never heard our Story" (Behn, 1997). In Bossert's opinion, this speech "is to lament the binds of legalism" (Bossert, 2006). While laws against incest may be called natural, Oroonoko does suspect Imoinda's "marriage" to a king has not been consummated; moreover, it is an unnatural relationship in itself. Oroonoko does not call it a law, just a "custom." Customs may be foolish and are subject to change.

The hero changes his mind and gains access to his beloved. Nevertheless, he is unable to defend Imoinda and just threatens to murder the intruders. He kills nobody and flies to his army. Despaired at the news of Imoinda's death, he utters a short speech in which he dismisses the value of social hierarchy: "It is not Titles make Men brave or good, or Birth that bestows Courage and Generosity, or makes the Owner happy" (Behn, 1997). This speech has just one metonymy: instead of "humanity" or "people" Oroonoko uses the expression "Creation of the Gods" (Behn, 1997). The hero undergoes a traditional for seventeenth-century European literature conflict between love and duty. He chooses duty and makes an ornate speech full of metaphors, e.g. "meet Death," "encounter him [Death. – V.T.]), "opposing the Torrent of a conquering Foe," "adorn the Triumphs of Jamoan" etc. (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko also uses the word "slave" – he calls himself a "love-sick Slave" (Behn, 1997). It should be taken into consideration that his "love-sick" slavery is the result of his submission to custom; therefore he may also be called a slave to custom.

The last speech by Oroonoko in the first part of the novel, which is set in Africa, is an ideologically-oriented monologue about honour. He contrasts a man of honour who values fame and reputation among the people with a

"Man of no Honour" who is contempted by all the people. He uses metaphors ("diseasing all Mankind," "dies every day ignominiously in his Fame"), a metonymy ("honester World" instead of honester people), but does not mention either freedom or slavery (Behn, 1997). Honour is a binding principle for Oroonoko.

A conclusion can be made that in the first part of the novel the hero is "royal" because he is a prince, but he is a slave because he is a slave to custom. A.R. Bossert III noticed that "Oroonoko is a royal slave long before he meets the English trader" (Bossert, 2006). He has to obey the customs because he is the prince, but, on the other hand, he does not want to change custom, although it might be in his power. His direct speech does not show "he wants desperately to tear himself away from them [customs. – V.T.]. (Bossert, 2006). Bossert speaks of "Oroonoko's triple slavery": he is a king's slave (better to say custom's slave), an enslaved king, and an enthroned slave (Bossert, 2006). If we talk about Oroonoko as a "royal slave" both in Coramantien and Surinam parts of the novel, we can call him a prince who is a slave to custom in the first part and a slave who preserved his royal dignity and inner freedom in the second one.

Coming to Surinam, the hero addresses a treacherous English captain with a bitter irony: "to gain so true a Knowledge both of you, and of your Gods by whom you swear" (Behn, 1997). He also addresses to "Fellow-slaves," wondering if they can meet more "honour and honesty" in the "next World" (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko identifies himself with other African slaves instead of his position in African society. This speech also refers to Oroonoko's first speech, in which he considered the possibility of flying with Imoinda "to some unknown World" (Behn, 1997).

Being fortunate to have a good and kind slave-owner Mr Trefry, Oroonoko enters a dialogue with him. The subject of the dialogue is Clemene, a beautiful young slave resisting sexual advances of both other slaves and slave-owners. Oroonoko makes a clear distinction between Clemene and other slaves on aesthetic ground – because she is "so beautiful," but acknowledges her position in relation to Trefry as Trefry's slave and is surprised why her owner does not want her to submit to his desires. Woman's position is subordinate throughout the novel both in African and English colonial society. Nevertheless, women are respected by Oroonoko, who is not only a royal, but also a "gallant slave" (Behn, 1997). It can be proved by Oroonoko's polite address to the ladies, in which he proposes to bring them the heart of a tiger that had terrorised them for some time.

The ideological culmination of the novel is Oroonoko's speech against slavery. It is significant that it is explicitly called "an Harangue... of the Miseries, and Ignominies of Slavery" (Behn, 1997). The genre of a harangue, a speech of an eminent person dedicated to some important topic, was exploited before Behn by her contemporary, a famous French woman writer Madeleine de Scudery. Madelleine de Scudery's *Les femmes illustres; ou Les harangues heroiques* was first published in France in 1642. It was translated into English and published anonymously in 1661 (*Severall witty discourses*). Two of the speeches, the sixth and the ninth harangues, are dedicated to the issue of royal slavery. In both of them royal women try to restore their power. *Sixth Harangue: Cariclia to Theagenes – That those who never suffer'd Troubles, a cannot trule tell what Pleasure is* draws closer to Oroonoko's harangue than the other one. But its subject is not the miseries of slavery, but the cathartical effect of suffering, including the suffering originating in slavery. Most probably, Aphra Behn was acquainted with Scudery's text (at least in English translation), and her hero's "harangue" contains explicit polemic with Scudery's harangue on ideological, if not stylistical ground. If we talk about other literary works providing historical background for Oroonoko's speech, we should not forget that in seventeenth-century English literature the speeches of dying people were quite popular, as from 1640 to 1685 there were quite a few executions of eminent people, among them King Charles I, the regicides, prince Monmouth and his followers. In French literature of the next eighteenth century the harangues of black characters, "fictively ventriloquized by European sympathizers" became quite popular (Garraway, 2005). They were present in the works by Prevost, Saint-Lambert and Raynal. As for European literature of the seventeenth-century, such harangues by Black slaves were almost non-existent.

Direct speech in this episode is introduced after indirect speech and even a detailed narrative report of speech act. Oroonoko first counts up "all their Toyls and Sufferings under such Loads, Burdens, and Drudgeries, as were fitter for Beasts than Men; Senseless Brutes, than Human Souls" (Behn, 1997). The contrast of men as human beings and animals is significant here. Slavery brings a person to the level of an animal and does not make him or her nobler, as Scudery's Cariclia claimed. Then narrative report is transformed into indirect speech: "He told them it was not for Days, Months or Years, but for Eternity" (Behn, 1997). There is no way out of slavery; it is a

permanent, not temporary condition. Oroonoko does not believe in peaceful liberation of the slaves. The sequence is closer to free indirect speech, as it lacks tags like "he told them" or "he said." The subject is turned to the contrast between men and animals again expressed through the image of dogs loving "the whip and Bell" (Behn, 1997). The conclusion is made that slaves lost "the Divine Quality of Men" (Behn, 1997). While a man is a divine creature, a slave is nobody.

The rest of the episode in free indirect speech gives colourful and terrible details of the condition of South American Black slaves that can be proved by contemporary historical sources. South American plantations were notorious for their cruel treatment of Black slaves by means of abusive whipping.

Oroonoko's direct speech starts with a question "shou'd we be Slaves to an unknown People?" (Behn, 1997). The beginning of this question can be found in all kinds of literary and non-literary works related to the issues of emancipation and freedom. In the next three questions Oroonoko justifies slavery as a result of war – in his society prisoners of war are turned into slaves. His irritation at the institution of slavery in South American colonies is expressed in a simile and is due to the fact they, Black slaves, "are Bought and Sold like Apes, or Monkeys" (Behn, 1997). They are turned into animals and become a commodity. Their owners are "Women, Fools and Cowards," as well as "Rogues, Runagades, that have abandon'd their own Countries, for Rapin, Murders, Thefts and Villanies" (Behn, 1997). Such people do not deserve to be slave-owners. After condemning English colonists Oroonoko poses another question: "Shall we render Obedience to such a degenerate race [?]" (Behn, 1997). In his opinion, such people "have no one Humane Vertue left, to distinguish 'em from the vilest Creatures" (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko finishes his speech with a question addressed to his supporters: "Will you, I say, suffer the Lash from such Hands?" (Behn, 1997). A brutal type of punishment exercised by English slave-owners makes the punishment worthless, as the people who punish are so vile.

This speech shows Oroonoko the leader of a rebellion, who stirs people's hearts and conscience with the images of human degradation in the state of a slave to an animal, on the one hand, and human degradation in the state of a slave-owner, on the other hand, although the hero limits this kind of degradation to the society of English colonists. He justifies the slavery in Africa as an outcome of the war, but he considers unjust the slavery based on cheat and treachery. Oroonoko thinks that English colonists being the people below any human standards do not deserve to own slaves.

Oroonoko's speech is quite clear in its message. The slavery is permanent; therefore, the only way out of slavery is rebellion. Oroonoko treats his audience with respect, as he calls them "my dear Friends and Fellow-sufferers" and addresses questions to them (Behn, 1997). His rhetorical strategy is to make them think about their position and to decide for themselves what to do. If we seek historical references and make historical parallels, we cannot avoid parallels with English revolution and Monmouth's rebellion. Especially Monmouth's rebellion is a good parallel, as it was led by the son of the king (although his legitimacy was very much under question). The problem arises here as Oroonoko sympathises with the king Charles I and laments his death, and he seems not to want to destroy social order. Anyway, placing Oroonoko's speech in historical context is one of the most difficult problems of the novel.

There is a dispute among Behn scholars whether Oroonoko's rhetoric was successful or not. Robitaille says that "Oroonoko uses what appears to be powerful rhetoric when he attempts to solicit support from his fellow slaves for the rebellion" (Robitaille, 1995). Bossert claims that Oroonoko suffers a "rhetorical failure" (Bossert, 2006). Robitaille partly agrees and makes an interesting remark that Oroonoko's "inability to execute a successful slave rebellion" "may be due in part to his unfortunate choice of words" (Robitaille, 1995). After Oroonoko's "harangue" against slavery Behn inserts a dialogue between Tuscan, "a tall Negro of some more Quality than the rest" and Oroonoko on their future (Behn, 1997). It is presented partly in direct speech, but, as for Oroonoko's words, they are presented in indirect speech. Oroonoko first plans to "plant a New Colony," but then to find a ship to bring them "to their own Countries" (Behn, 1997). Ironically, "this phrase is a metaphor for heaven" (Robitaille, 1995). Robitaille's hypothesis may be proved by the piece of narrative after this dialogue, in which "Fellow-slaves" "with one accord Vow'd to follow him to Death" (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko promises to make them free "in his Kingdom, and be Esteem'd as his Fellow-sufferers" (Behn, 1997). He thinks death is more honourable choice "than to Live in perpetual Slavery" (Behn, 1997). But this choice proves to be inacceptable for his followers. In Bossert's words, "having persuaded the rebels by appealing to their self-interest rather than the collective good, Oroonoko fails to

unite the slaves under a new national identity" (Bossert, 2006). To put it more correctly, Oroonoko appeals not only to his followers' self-interest, but to their self-esteem. He believes that they will support him because they feel the same as he does, that they cannot bear even a name of the slave. But they are different from him and are easily distressed, when English colonists take their whips to fight them. Whip is a sign of dishonour, but it is also a sign of power. Oroonoko's failure is one of an idealist believing (at least for a large part of the novel) in human equality and the irrelevance of "titles." In despair after their betrayal he calls his ex-friends "by Nature Slaves" (Behn, 1997). This remark has been used by many scholars to prove Oroonoko's contempt for lower classes, but it is crucial to notice the same idea was expressed by John Cook, a regicide, who in a letter to a friend sent from Tower just before his execution in 1660 claimed they "sought Public good, and would have infranchised the people... if the Nation had not more delighted in Servitude, than in Freedom" (Anon., 1720). When Oroonoko comes to a conclusion freedom cannot be obtained by everyone and there are some people who are born slaves, his comment refers not only to Black slaves, but to English people too. It is significant Behn chooses indirect speech for this episode. This opinion is not limited to the hero; it is most probably shared by the narrator too. Emancipation is very problematic in this novel. Liberation from slavery, as Bossert notices, "requires a will to freedom" (Bossert, 2006). While Oroonoko and Imoinda have such will, their companions do not.

The rest of Oroonoko's direct speech in the novel concerns issues of honour. The relationship between freedom and honour is one of the most problematic issues in the text. Is there freedom for a person with no honour? Does honour limit freedom or is it a basis for freedom? In his direct speech Oroonoko does not raise these questions. Honour is one of the principal values for him along with virtue and freedom. Replying to the English captain who mistrusted his words because he was not a Christian, he says: "Let him know I Swear by my Honour, which to violate, wou'd not only render me contemptible and despised by all brave and honest Men, and so give my self perpetual pain, but it wou'd be eternally offending and diseasing all Mankind" (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko's own "hell" is dishonour; in the final of the novel the symbol of dishonour is whipping. Talking about the Governor Byam, who had him whipped like a common slave, Oroonoko notices: "It had been well for him, if he had Sacrific'd me, instead of giving me the contemptable Whip" (Behn, 1997). Oroonoko decides to revenge: "No, I wou'd not kill my self, even after a Whipping, but will be content to live with that Infamy, and be pointed at by every grinning Slave, till I have compleated my Revenge" (Behn, 1997). The same as with honour, dishonour for Oroonoko is not personal, it is a threat for all the people, for the very foundations of morality.

Oroonoko's speech lacks ambiguity. He shows straightforwardly his attitude to the situations he finds himself in and sticks to moral values that for him exist independently from religion. Although he is almost broken at the end of the novel, he suffers his execution stoically. To make the novel even more enigmatic than it is usually thought, it should be noticed his execution is almost the same as that of a regicide John Cook in 1660.

Conclusion

Stylistic analysis of the use of direct speech in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* shows that the issue of slavery and freedom is one of the most important for the hero. In the first part of the novel set in Coramantien Oroonoko admits he is a love-sick slave and expresses his unwillingness to disobey the custom. His speech drives from that of utter despair to that of heroic decisiveness to fight his country's enemies and gain glory. Cheated by an English captain, Oroonoko declares his principles of honour in contrast to false, in his opinion, principles of religion. In the second part of the novel set in Surinam Oroonoko becomes a true royal slave, as his slavery is only his position, while his inner self remains free. Regularly cheated by English authorities, or, better to say, by the absence of true authority in the colony, the hero decides to free himself, his wife and his future child by means of a rebellion. In his "harangue" against slavery he treats his followers as his equals and uses rhetoric more appropriate for nowadays, than for the seventeenth century. He appeals to people's self-esteem and does not appeal to their collective identity as a nation. Oroonoko fails because of his idealism and too abstract treatment of human nature.

Oroonoko's direct speech in the novel does not explain the link between freedom and honour. It remains problematic throughout the novel, as the hero concentrates at one point on freedom and at another point on honour. Nevertheless, his direct speech clarifies his own position in the novel. He is a leader exercising his rhetorical skills.

References

Robitaille, M.M. (1995). *Earning the right to speak her mind: etiological authority in the rhetoric of Aphra Behn's prose fiction*. PhD, dissertation. Denton: Texas Woman's University.

Behn, A. (1997). *Oroonoko*. New York: Norton & Company.

Bossert A.R. III. (2006). The *golden chain: royal slavery, sovereignty and servitude in Early Modern English literature, 1550-1688*. PhD dissertation. College Park: University of Maryland.

Garraway, D. (2005). *The Libertine colony: creolization in the Early French Carribbean*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Anon. (1720). *The dying speeches and behaviour of the several state prisoners*. London: Printed for J, Brotherton and W. Meadows.